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Descriptive Sketch of the
Massachusetts
Public School System.

By John W. Dickinson,
Secretary of the Board of Education.



BRIEF DESCRIPTIVE SKETCH
OF THE
MASSACHUSETTS
PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM.

BY
JOHN W. DICKINSON,

SECRETARY OF THE BOARD OF EDUCATION.

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THE MASSACHUSETTS PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM.

THE BOARD OF EDUCATION.

THE Massachusetts Board of Education consists of the Governor and Lieutenant-Governor, and eight members appointed by the Governor with the advice and consent of the Council. The appointed members hold office for eight years.

POWERS AND DUTIES.

The Board takes and holds in trust for the Commonwealth any grant or devise of lands, and any donation or bequest of money or other personal property made to it for educational purposes. It prescribes the form of registers to be kept in the schools, and the form of the blanks and inquiries for the returns to be made by school committees, and makes an annual report to the General Court containing an abstract of these returns, together with a detailed report of the doings of the Board. It is the duty of the Board to suggest the best means of promoting popular education and to require the towns of the State to obey all laws relating to the establishment and support of public schools.

SECRETARY AND HIS DUTIES.

The Board appoints its own secretary, who, under its direction makes an abstract of school returns; collects information respecting the condition of the public schools; and spreads as widely as possible throughout the Commonwealth information concerning the best course of studies, and the best method of instruction for the young, in order that they may receive the best education which public schools can be made to impart.

He visits different parts of the Commonwealth for the purpose of awakening an interest in the public schools, and receives and arranges in his office the State documents in relation to the public school system. Under the direction of the Board he holds teachers' meetings and teachers' institutes; publishes an annual report; and sends out blank forms of inquiry, the school registers, the annual report of the Board, and his own annual report, to the clerks of the different cities and towns for distribution.

AGENTS OF THE BOARD OF EDUCATION.

The Board appoints suitable agents to visit the cities and towns for the purpose of inquiring into the condition of the schools, of meeting and conferring with teachers and school committees, and aiding the secretary in organizing and conducting teachers' institutes.

SCHOOL COMMITTEES.

Every city and town in the Commonwealth is required to elect a school committee consisting of three members or of some number divisible by three.

These officers have the general charge and superintendence of the public schools. They determine the number of schools a town shall maintain, the course of studies to be taught, the textbooks to be used, and the method of teaching to be employed. They classify and distribute pupils in such a manner as they think best adapted to their general proficiency and welfare. They elect the teachers and fix their salaries, and at the end of the school year they make a report to their respective towns of their doings, and make such suggestions as they think the welfare of the schools requires. The term of office of the school committee is three years.

SUPERINTENDENTS OF SCHOOLS.

A city by ordinance and a town by vote may require the school committee annually to appoint a superintendent, who, under the direction and control of said committee, shall have the care and supervision of the public schools.

The superintendent is supposed to be an expert in all school matters, and to give his whole time to the supervision of the schools.

The small towns of the Commonwealth may provide themselves with school superintendents by uniting into districts for that purpose. Such districts receive aid from the State in the payment of salaries of both superintendents and teachers.

STATE NORMAL SCHOOLS.

The State maintains five normal schools and one normal art school for the professional training of teachers employed in the public schools. The time of the shorter course of studies in these schools extends through a period of two years, the time of the advanced course extends through a period of four years. The school year is divided into two terms of twenty weeks each with daily sessions of not less than five days each week.

The oldest normal school in this country was established at Lexington, Massachusetts, July, 1839.

NORMAL ART SCHOOL.

The State Normal Art School was opened at Boston in the month of October, 1873.

The school offers a four years' course of training in the scientific and artistic branches and their practical application to industry, and a two years' course of training for the work of teaching and supervising drawing in the public schools.

CITY NORMAL AND TRAINING SCHOOLS.

Boston maintains one city normal school for the professional training of young women (graduates of the city high schools) for positions as teachers in the public schools. The course of studies and exercises in this school are essentially the same as those in the two years' course in the State normal schools.

In other cities and large towns of the State, training schools and training classes are organized.

The city normal school and the training schools and classes are under the charge and superintendence of the school committees of the various towns where these institutions are located.

TEACHERS' INSTITUTES.

The Board of Education has authority to conduct teachers' institutes in different parts of the Commonwealth, and the Legislature makes annual appropriations for their support. The ends to be accomplished by the State teachers' institutes are: first, to direct the attention of the people and school boards to their public schools, and to the best way of promoting their welfare; second, to call the teachers together and discuss with them the principles of education and the true method of teaching; third, to present a collection and systematic arrangement of topics on the various branches of study required to be taught in the public schools; fourth, to suggest the best means of illustrating the topics; fifth, to present an approved plan of school organization and school government.

Evening lectures and conversations in connection with the day institutes have for their object the explanation of the duties of school officers in organizing and supervising the schools, and the duties of the towns in giving to the schools a hearty support.

PUBLIC SCHOOLS.

The public school system of Massachusetts includes kindergarten, primary, grammar, and high schools.

These schools hold a logical relation to one another in the kinds of knowledge pursued in each, in the different modes of mental activity required in the pursuit of the kinds of knowledge, and in the different phases of mental development which the activity is adapted to produce.

The educational value of our system of public schools becomes apparent when we consider that it makes complete provision for the pursuit of the two kinds of knowledge, — elementary and scientific, — for training the mind to observe and reason, for the cultivation of language by which individual facts and general truth may be described, and for having all done in a way best adapted to the formation of good moral and intellectual habits.

The high schools are to be continued for ten months in the year. The average length of all the schools is eight and a half months.

EVENING SCHOOLS.

Every town and city having ten thousand inhabitants, or more, must establish and maintain, in addition to the other schools required by law to be maintained therein, evening schools for the instruction of persons over twelve years of age.

Every town of fifty thousand inhabitants is required to establish and thereafter annually maintain an evening high school, in which shall be taught such branches of learning as the school committee thereof may deem expedient, whenever fifty or more residents, fourteen years of age or over, who desire, and, in the opinion of the school committee, are competent to pursue high-school studies, shall petition in writing for an evening high school and certify that they desire to attend such school.

INDUSTRIAL SCHOOLS.

A town may establish and support industrial schools in which instruction may be given in the arts and in the various trades and occupations.

NAUTICAL SCHOOLS.

A town may organize and maintain upon shore or upon ships, or other vessels, at the option of the school committee, one or more schools for training young men or boys in nautical duties.

TRUANT SCHOOLS.

Truant children, and children between seven and fifteen years of age found wandering about the streets or public places therein, having no lawful occupation or business, not attending school, and growing up in ignorance, are arrested and sent to truant schools.

Children who persistently violate the reasonable rules of the schools are provided for in the same institutions.

Here the children are provided with well-regulated homes and good schools in which they are taught the various branches required to be taught in the public schools, and they also receive a thorough training in the industrial occupations.

FREE TEXT-BOOKS.

The school committee of every city and town is required to purchase at the expense of such city or town text-books and other supplies used in the public schools, and to loan them to the pupils free of charge.

EMPLOYMENT OF CHILDREN.

The laws of the Commonwealth forbid the employment of children under thirteen years of age at any time in any factory, workshop, or mercantile establishment. Such children may not be employed in any indoor work, performed for wages or other compensation to whomsoever payable, during the hours when the public schools are in session in the city or town where they reside; nor shall they be employed at all while the schools are in session, unless they have attended school for twenty weeks during the year next preceding.

MASSACHUSETTS COMPULSORY LAW.

Every person having under his control a child between the ages of eight and fourteen years shall annually cause such child to attend some public day school in the city or town where he resides for at least thirty weeks, if the schools are kept open so long, with an allowed absence of two weeks. For every neglect of such duty, the person offending shall forfeit a sum not exceeding twenty dollars.

If the child has attended a private school approved by the school committee, or has been otherwise instructed for a like period of time in the branches of learning required by law to be taught in the public schools, or has acquired a knowledge of the branches of learning required to be taught in the public schools, or if his physical or mental condition renders such attendance inexpedient, such penalty shall not be incurred.

The compulsory school laws of the Commonwealth are well received and cheerfully obeyed.

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